

Can Chapters 23-30
of the Rule of Saint Benedict
be the Basis of a Disciplinary Policy
for a Benedictine School?

An Essay

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The Rule of Saint Benedict, written by the saint himself in the sixth century, has for more than a millennium provided a beacon for the ideal monastic life. It remains today followed by 8,000 monks and 16,000 nuns and sisters¹ who seek that purity of spirit and state of extreme humility advocated by Benedict as the path to God and salvation. The Rule offers a complete *modus operandi* for monastic life, giving guidance on all matters. Such detailed instructions leave no confusion about the correct way to behave. This structured, precise Rule, described by Saint Benedict as a summary of the gospels and how to live accordingly, was written with a clear community in mind; an enclosed monastic community.

Since the Rule was not written for schools, can any part of it be applied to a school whose fundamental aim must surely be to educate pupils for the wider world? It is important to consider what differentiates a Benedictine school from a merely Catholic school, a non-Catholic school or say, a Jesuit school. Surely the resounding answer is that a Benedictine school is run by Benedictine religious with clear policies based upon the Rule? Thus a Benedictine school must enhance the relationship of pupils with God, ensuring their education is essentially guided by the gospel.

A school, however, unlike a monastery cannot be enclosed; by beginning a school the community foregoes complete enclosure.² Which is more important, the original, enclosed way of life designed by Benedict, or the benefits of opening a school? These benefits were recruitment and finance as well as providing 'work' for the community. Boys and girls passing through the school while paying to attend may have joined the monastery subsequently.

¹ Benedictine Confederation.

² Dom David Knowles, later a distinguished Cambridge historian nearly caused a schism at Downside in the 1930s by petitioning Rome to establish a new monastery free of school commitments.

We are really asking, therefore, the degree to which a Benedictine community, which chooses to operate a school, can and should incorporate the Rule in its school policies. Today, some schools are more evidently Benedictine than others, the Rule being more widely applied and referenced within the school's daily life.³ Since the Rule is such a truly integrated document, applicable only in its totality for monasteries, any adaptation for schools should surely be equally full and unified, covering all aspects? In the past, Benedictines have tried applying the Rule more literally within schools, pupils attending the Divine Offices and daily Mass, and subject to corporal punishment.⁴

However, the Rule does not address the young, even less so those of today. A highly materialistic secular culture means the Rule's fundamental pillars, obedience and humility, seem remote and uninspiring. While obedience is naturally linked to discipline, since rules must be obeyed, for Benedictines obedience is linked to humility. The third of twelve stages of humility is to: *"submit oneself out of love of God to whatever obedience under a superior may require of us" RB7*. Only by humbly obeying all commands do brethren remain free of arrogance or high-mindedness, both punishable offences, retaining discipline within the community.

A key to the Rule's enduring appeal within so many cultures is the discretion allowed the Abbot. Since the Rule can thus be adapted it does not become irrelevant or outdated. An example of this flexibility was the decision of several Abbots within the English Benedictine Congregation who concluded there was no barrier to accepting girls within their

³ For example, on English Benedictine Congregation school websites, Ampleforth devotes more pages to the Rule than Downside, Worth, St. Benedict's, and Portsmouth Abbey combined.

⁴ The Raven, 1951-1969 and conversations with Old Gregorians from this period.

schools. Globally, Benedictine schools today remain mainly single sex⁵ so this pioneering move indicates the openness of the Benedictine way.

Interpretation can also be applied to Chapters 23-30 and with flexible open-minded reading these chapters can be used to form the basis of a disciplinary policy for a Benedictine school.

However, the chapters provide only guidance, giving no clear instructions how to operate within a school. To maintain the order the Rule gives the monastery, a parallel Rule, specifically for schools, is needed: 'The Rule of Saint Benedict for Twenty First Century Schools' is non-existent. Such a document would provide a holistic framework for Benedictine schools' disciplinary policy. Its absence makes it difficult to isolate the area of discipline, understanding how specifics of the Rule could be sensibly and legally applied to a school. A new holistic structure coincides with current educational thinking. The United Kingdom 2006 Education and Inspection Act stresses the importance of approaching behaviour and discipline as a whole school issue linked to all issues of teaching and learning.

Within the Rule, Benedict describes the necessary qualities of an Abbot who leads the community with absolute authority, acting in the place of Christ and who is a father to the brethren. As a father, the Abbot must entreat the meek and obedient with loving affection, but must also: *"criticise more sternly those who are undisciplined and unruly"* RB2. He not only declares guilt, but also decides suitable punishment for the offence. It follows, or does it, that a Benedictine school's counter-part to the Abbot, the Head Master, would hold similar authority? However, the Rule gives no guidance on the qualities of a Head Master. Being necessarily more junior, the Head Master must remain obedient to the

⁵ ICBE Database

Abbot. What role, if any then, does the Abbot play within the school? Are the students part of his flock?

This complex hierarchy must also heed legal requirements. The 2006 Education and Inspections Act (section 88 2:3) states it is the Board of Governors who ‘must’ have responsibility for final decisions about disciplinary policies. At Downside, the Abbot is Chairman of the Board. This discussion of the person, or body, which holds authority is crucial to Chapters 23-30 which give a carefully calibrated series of steps, particularly for the superior, to bring a stray sheep back into the flock.

Beginning with private admonition by seniors, followed by public rebuke, there are then various degrees of separation from the brethren, called excommunication. The offender is barred from all communication: *“None of the community should associate with or talk to the guilty person, who is to persevere alone in sorrow and penance”* RB25. There are various levels of excommunication depending on the gravity of the fault committed. A brother, guilty of a less serious fault: *“should be excluded from taking part in community meals at the common table”* RB24. More serious faults cause exclusion also from common prayer in the oratory.

Within schools, similarities exist between excommunication and both ‘sending to coventry’⁶ and suspension, when a pupil is segregated from peers. Most often suspension results from repetition of a fault, previously punished. However, within the policy of suspension at Downside,⁷ an errant pupil may receive a less severe ‘internal’ suspension - the spending of all free time in seclusion in the Old House, a staff only area – or, a more serious ‘external’ suspension, when sent down in disgrace.

⁶ As described in Enid Blyton’s Malory Towers Series.

⁷ Unofficial observation at Downside.

Excommunication is only the result of previous punishments failing to impact on the wayward brother. Saint Benedict felt strongly about giving further chances, forgiveness being a key ingredient of the Benedictine ideal. Private warnings followed by public rebuke, finally led to excommunication. Likewise school punishments increase with repetition of a fault. A student is sent to the House Master or Mistress, then to the Deputy Head Master, for verbal remonstrations. They may receive calibrated detentions, extra supervised work during breaks, with subsequent suspensions if the fault persists. This gradation, through detention and suspension, reflects the gradation of sanctions up to excommunication stated in Chapters 23-30.

In the Rule, after excommunication, if the guilty brother shows no improvement, he must submit to corporal punishment. Yet, if still he persists, then a remedy more powerful is needed: *“the personal prayer of the superior and of all the community” RB28*. Subsequently, only the ultimate penalty of expulsion remains. While Benedict strives to avoid this, he concedes that eventually: *“the superior must turn to the knife of amputation, [...] lest one diseased sheep corrupt the whole flock” RB28*. The incorrigible brother is expelled from the monastery. Expulsion is also the final penalty of a school and the Head Master’s decision. Since displeasing to Benedict, perhaps Benedictine schools try to avoid expulsion, encouraging pupils to amend faults, but eventually the wayward student must also be asked to leave for the benefit of the community. Again, this is consistent with national policy which recognises poor behaviour blights learning, is disruptive in other ways also, and that systems of graduated sanctions climaxing in exclusion must apply. However, secular educational culture recognises good behaviour must be rewarded as a balance to

sanctions. Since the Rule focuses on salvation, appropriate earthly rewards for school students need to be considered.

In Chapter 30 Benedict outlines penalties for children under fifteen who cannot understand the gravity of excommunication. For them, misbehaviour should be corrected by: *“severe fasting or sharp strokes of the rod”*. Enforced fasting and corporal punishment of individuals are both now forbidden by law, thus a literal interpretation of this chapter can no longer be applied.

It is impossible to say Chapters 23-30 could alone form a school’s disciplinary policy since they contain only part of Benedict’s approach to discipline. Only by drawing on the whole Rule could a policy be drawn up that truly incorporated the Rule into a unified Benedictine policy document for schools today. Despite current illegality of some of the remedies at the doctor’s disposal (*after RB 27, 28*), I believe that the disciplinary policy of a Benedictine school could indeed be based on Chapters 23-30. Furthermore, if a Rule of Saint Benedict for schools was developed, then school communities would have the greater clarity of structure and purpose that monasteries enjoy. In an increasingly uncertain world, our cherished faith and Benedictine ideals, made manifest in our schools, provide beacons of hope for the future.

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